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Thumbs Drum in Rise of Multitasking Rudeness

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Abstract

This pilot study investigates selected etiquette issues that appear to have arisen with the prevalence of hand-held electronic communications. Researchers surveyed college undergraduates, graduates, and faculty about the appropriateness of multitasking when others are present, whether they thank people with a hand-written note, by telephone, or by email, and the appropriateness of their preferred means of saying thank you. This study raises questions about etiquette issues when using electronic communications.

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As our department meeting started one afternoon, a junior faculty member sitting in the back row glanced at her Blackberry, thumbed the keys for twenty-five minutes, then returned the item to her purse. Is this behavior considered impolite?

In a graduate class, a student sat with her hands under the table, texting a classmate. When questioned about this behavior, the student claimed that she didn't want to disturb the class by talking, so she texted her classmate instead. Is this distracting to other students? Is it a breach of common classroom courtesy?

Many questions arise about rudeness and the ubiquitous use of electronic communications in our society. Technologically facilitated acts of disrespect are rampant (Dolliver, 2009; Rashid, 2005; Rasmussen, 2009). Since electronic communication became an integral part of contemporary culture, the rise of rudeness appears to be accelerating.

Multitasking (undertaking more than one task at a time) provides ample opportunities for committing electronic offenses. WorldOne Research (2009) found that white collar workers born after 1979 were more likely to multitask than older generations. Multitasking in this context involved attending to programs and sites that were not necessarily work-related. These workers spent an average of 10.6 hours of every work day accessing social networking web sites, news web sites, blogs, Internet forums and multimedia sharing web sites, versus 5.6 hours reported by those workers born before 1964.

It seems that whatever rules of etiquette that existed in the time of Emily Post

have been progressively demolished. When and under what circumstances is multitasking considered rude? Is holding a real-time conversation while texting a third person polite? In the present study the authors surveyed members of the college community about their use of electronic communications, addressing questions such as these in an effort to determine attitudes toward proper etiquette.

Population

Our survey of electronic communications addressed demographic information and participants' use and opinions of e-communications. We surveyed undergraduate and graduate students and faculty members at an urban college. Surveys were distributed at the beginning of the fall 2009 semester. There were 57 participants including 6 males and 51 females. Ages ranged from 20s to 60s, with about 70% in their 20s.

Selected Findings

When asked about multitasking that involves an electronic device, 74% self-reported the ability to multitask, whereas only 26% stated that they cannot. Participants were asked about etiquette issues with regard to multitasking. Most participants (68%) thought that it was impolite to multitask in the presence of another person. Most participants (66%) judged another as impolite if that person multitasked in their presence. Most thought (68%) that others also considered this to be rude.

In the past, before the advent of electronic communication, hand written thank you notes were the mark of a polite person with "good upbringing." When participants were asked if they ever thank people by hand writing a note, 18% reported that they hand write frequently, 40% hand write notes occasionally, 33% seldom hand write notes, and 9% never hand write notes of thanks.

When asked if they thank people by phone, 42% thank people frequently by phone, 44% thank people occasionally by phone, 9% seldom thank people by phone, and 4% never thank people by phone.

When asked about the etiquette of thanking people by email, 18% thought this is improper and 61% thought it was appropriate to thank people by email. A few participants qualified their responses by saying that thanking someone by email is only “proper for work” (1 response), “depends on the relationship/who they are” (2 responses), is “okay for friends, but not for your boss” (1 response), is “okay if the communication started via email” (1 response), and is “not okay if the people don’t go online often” (1 response).

Discussion

It appears that rules for proper etiquette are changing as electronic devices proliferate in our society. Almost 70% of our participants believe it is improper to multitask when another person is present, but the remaining 30% feel it would be within the bounds of appropriate etiquette.

The survey participants prefer to thank others by phone rather than by the seemingly outdated practice of hand writing notes. As for thanking people by email, the majority of participants believe that it is appropriate, while an additional 10% of the respondents qualify their answers. Although our survey did not ask about using a public forum like Facebook for thanking others, an item in a recent newspaper advice column referred to just that. The writer was chagrined that the receiver of her gift ran out of thank-you notes and thanked her not with a personal email, but on Facebook. The columnist wisely responded that the receiver of a gift should express gratitude in a way

that makes the donor feel appreciated (Dickinson, 2009). This seems to be an appropriate way to approach etiquette issues expressing thanks.

Are we in the midst of a rudeness revolution or an etiquette evolution?
Is the new e-culture a democratizing force? (Will everyone soon be equally rude?) This pilot study leaves us with concluding questions rather than conclusions.

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